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Viewing cable 09MEXICO193, THE BATTLE JOINED: NARCO VIOLENCE TRENDS IN 2008

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
09MEXICO193	2009-01-23 23:12	2011-08-30 01:44	SECRET//NOFORN	Embassy Mexico

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SUBJECT: THE BATTLE JOINED: NARCO VIOLENCE TRENDS IN 2008

REF: A. CIUDAD JUAREZ 22

[1](#)B. MEXICO 3586

[1](#)C. MEXICO 2371

[1](#)D. MEXICO 3498

[1](#)E. MEXICO 3779

[1](#)F. MEXICO 1766

Summary

¶1. (C) 2008 set a new record for organized crime-related homicides with more than 6000 killings. Violence in Mexico suddenly provided fodder for U.S. and international media with commentators suggesting worse to come. While the death toll is already at disturbing levels, and there are no signs violence will taper off anytime soon, we will continue to evaluate information or evidence that would suggest the cartels have decided to up the ante significantly by undertaking mass-casualty attacks on civilians, systematically attacking GOM officials or institutions or targeting USG personnel. Internecine struggles among the cartels and GOM counter narcotic successes have increased the costs of doing business and account for most of the up-tick last year. Frustrated traffickers, seeking to diversify profit-making activities through kidnappings and extortion, account for more. End Summary.

Drug-Related Homicides on the Rise

¶2. (C) Few killings in Mexico are thoroughly investigated, and determining which are truly related to organized crime remains an inexact science, but Mexico's Attorney General's office's year-end estimate stands at 6262. Other GOM authorities put the toll from organized crime slightly higher. SEDENA reports that drug-related killings represented roughly 17% of all homicides last year, while the National System of Public Security (SNSP -- part of the Public Security Secretariat (SSP)) estimates a total of approximately 10,700 intentional homicides.

(S/NF) Table I: Organized Crime-Related Killings, By Year*

2005 1855
2006 2489
2007 3038
2008 6380

*Source: SEDENA

(S/NF) Table II: 2008 OC-Related Killings, By Month*

Jan 282
Feb 283
Mar 417
Apr 320
May 496
Jun 531
Jul 540
Aug 587
Sep 526
Oct 847
Nov 843
Dec 708

*Source: SEDENA

Spike in Violence Concentrated at the Border

¶3. (C) Violence continued to be concentrated in a few key states, and in 2008 there was a spike in drug-related killings in the northern border territories. An estimated 41 percent of these homicides took place in Chihuahua and Baja California states and largely in two urban areas, Ciudad Juarez and Tijuana. (see MEXICO 3586). Sinaloa continued to rank among the most violent states with approximately 1048 (or 18%) of these killings. The surge in violence along the border stems largely from the intensified struggle among

cartels over a few lucrative land crossings to the U.S. In particular, the January 2008 arrest of cartel leader Alfredo Beltran Leyva sparked a serious rift among the Gulf, Juarez and Sinaloa (Pacific) cartels, which is being played out viciously in Ciudad Juarez. (See MEXICO 1766) In Tijuana, rival factions of the weakened Arellano Felix Organization, one of which is backed by the Sinaloa cartel, are battling for control.

Changes In Cartel Behavior

¶4. (SBU) Beyond its broadened scope, the nature of cartel violence changed in 2008: organized violence was characterized by significantly increased brutality, a callous disregard for the potential for collateral damage and more frequent targeting of soldiers and police. Mexico's drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) have also more frequently orchestrated violence to send intimidating messages to security forces, the Mexican public and the body politic.

¶5. (SBU) Incidents, such as the August beheadings of 12 in Yucatan, the execution style killing of 24 on the outskirts of Mexico City in September, late fall killings of soldiers in Monterrey and Guerrero in late December contributed to growing public unease here and garnered media attention abroad. Several first-time-ever incidents involving grenades and improvised explosive devices (such as the notorious Independence Day grenade attack in Morelia, the shooting and undetonated grenade attack on the US Consulate in Monterrey, the use of improvised explosive devices in downtown Mexico City and Sinaloa, and a grenade attack on police cadets in Jalisco) demonstrate that not only have the cartels successfully expanded their arsenals, but at least some elements have developed a tolerance for inflicting civilian casualties.

¶6. (SBU) Cartels have also expanded their use of violence to intimidate. Beheadings and the prominent placement of dismembered bodies in public places, relatively rare two years ago are now common throughout the country. The late night grenade/shooting attack on our consulate in Monterrey was obviously designed to send a message, although no individual or group has ever claimed responsibility. More explicit was the January assault on the Monterrey offices of Televisa, accompanied by a message telling the broadcaster to do a better job reporting on corrupt public officials. Attacks such as these remain sporadic so far, and we have insufficient indications whether they mark a new trend or not.

¶7. (SBU) Despite these sporadic attacks, Mexico's drug war continues to primarily impact security forces and those linked directly or indirectly to the drug trade. The civilian population in some urban areas along the border remains bunkered down with some of those who have the money either sending their children to school in the U.S. or relocating entirely to minimize risk. In much of the rest of the country, though, the civilian population not involved in the drug trade remains essentially insulated from the violence, though not from its effects.

Police Killings Increase Along With Overall Death Toll

¶8. (SBU) SEDENA estimates that at least 522 civilian law enforcement and military personnel were murdered last year, compared to 315 in 2007.

(S/NF) Table III: Drug-Related Military/Police Homicides:
2007* 2008**
(% of total)

AFI 22 (6.9) 5 (1.0)
PFP 12 (3.8) 37 (19.7)
State
Police 62 (19.8) 110 (21.1)

Ministerial
Police 63 (20.0) 14 (2.7)
Municipal
Police 120 (38.0) 305 (58.4)
Military 27 (8.6) 51 (9.8)
Other 9 (2.9) Unavailable

Total 315 522
CENAPI (Mexico's Center for Information, Analysis and
Planning) statistics
**SEDENA statistics

¶9. (C) Increased confrontations between security forces and criminals is one explanation for the increasing killing of security forces personnel. GOM authorities argue that killings are no longer just score-settling among bad cops, but increasingly the consequence of the government's aggressive fight against the cartels. Some analysts we have spoken to agree. However, they also note that with few exceptions the majority of deaths are not the result of direct confrontations. They argue that the crackdown on police corruption has put compromised police officials in the position of either being prosecuted or breaking their established agreements/arrangements with the cartels. Hence, some of those who presumably choose the latter course are being punished brutally. (See MEXICO 2371, 3498)

¶10. (SBU) It is worth noting that police victims (at all levels of government) represented eight percent of all 2008 killings believed to be drug-related, a figure slightly lower than the percentage in 2007. The vast majority of victims continue to be state and municipal law enforcement officers. Senior level, federal police killings were still rare occurrences in 2008. The most high-profile death remains the May killing of Edgar Millan Gomez, the country's highest-ranking federal police officer.

Targeting of Soldiers An Ominous Sign

¶11. (S/NF) There have been notable incidents of horrific violence against soldiers, including a string of slayings of enlisted men in Monterrey in October and the systematic decapitation of seven troops in Guerrero (see MEXICO 3779). The theory that those killed in Guerrero were rogue soldiers involved in drug trafficking has been discounted, suggesting the cartels have begun to target soldiers to exact revenge for successes registered by the military and attempt to undermine the institution's resolve. The Monterrey and Guerrero killings immediately followed successful military operations in the respective regions resulting in seizures and arrests. Whether such tactics will have a chilling effect remains to be seen. Sources tell us that while some soldiers are more fearful, many others are keen to strike back at the cartels with greater resolve. SEDENA and SEMAR have instructed regional commanders to implement force protection counter-measures to reduce the risk of future incidents.

U.S. Personnel and Institutions Targets?

¶12. (C) We have observed a significant up-tick in threats, as well as incidents of surveillance, against USG personnel and properties over the last three months. All threats are treated seriously and precautions taken; fortunately, none has come to fruition.

¶13. (S/NF) On October 12, unknown persons fired gunshots and tossed an un-detonated grenade at the U.S. Consulate in Monterrey. The attack occurred after hours, no one was injured, and little damage occurred. No message was left and we have uncovered no useful intelligence regarding the authors or their motives. One unsubstantiated report cited a source claiming a senior Gulf cartel leader ordered the attack. However, with little hard evidence, no attempt to claim credit and no follow on incident to date, the

possibility remains that this was an isolated, possibly even impulsive, attack not likely undertaken at the behest of senior cartel leaders.

¶14. (C) While the cartels have not yet directly targeted USG law enforcement or other personnel, they have shown little reticence about going after some of our most reliable partners in Mexican law enforcement agencies. Ten close DEA law enforcement liaison officers have been killed since 2007, seven of whom were members of Special Vetted Units. Similarly, within the past two years 51 close FBI contacts have been murdered. More than sixty of Mexico's best law enforcement officers in whom we have placed our trust and with whom we have collaborated on sensitive investigations, shared intelligence and in many cases trained and vetted have been murdered by the cartels. We do know from sources that cartel members have at least contemplated the possibility of doing harm to both our personnel and institutions, but we frankly don't know enough about how DTO members think and operate to know what factors might trigger a decision to mount such an attack, but the potential threat is very real.

¶15. (C) We assess that the threat to U.S. personnel could increase if the violence continues to escalate and more high-level government officials and political leaders are targeted. Also, a reaction may be triggered if traffickers perceive their losses are due to U.S. support to the GOM's counter-narcotics efforts. We will continue to monitor potential threats to U.S. personnel from organized criminal gangs and be alert to information that suggests drug traffickers increasingly see the U.S. hand as responsible for their losses.

A Measure of Success?

¶16. (C) While attributing last year's significant spike in violence to its own successes marks an effort by the Calderon administration to put the best face possible on a grim situation, there is also considerable truth to the assertion. President Calderon's counter-narcotics team has scored significant successes, particularly in the last 12 months. Record numbers of weapons and drugs have been seized, key members of drug cartels have been arrested and/or extradited, cartel sources inside government institutions have been arrested) including a former Deputy Attorney General and the head of Interpol in Mexico. The GOM has disrupted cartel operations in meaningful ways; in year-end reports SEDENA and SEMAR reported that together they have reduced the maritime trafficking of illicit drugs by 65 percent and cut direct air transit of illegal drugs from Colombia by 90 percent. According to collaborative sensitive reporting, the January 2008 arrest of Alfredo Beltran Leyva split the Pacific Cartel, and accentuated antagonism between that DTO and the Gulf organization which caused the spike in violence in Chihuahua, Sinaloa, and Baja California (see also MEXICO 1766). In addition to these rifts, frustrated traffickers have turned to kidnappings and extortion to compensate for the loss in drug-trafficking revenue, expanding their reach and impacting a greater number of bystanders who have no involvement in DTO activities. These kinds of impacts bring home to ordinary Mexicans the nature of the struggle here.

Outlook

¶17. (C) Mexican authorities and law enforcement analysts predict that violence will likely get worse before it gets better. Recent truce rumors notwithstanding, there is currently no indication that the violence will soon abate; CENAPI reports 280 killings for the first 20 days of January. The cartels have shown themselves to be remarkably innovative, vicious, and resilient when aggressively confronted. Given their powerful weaponry and deep penetration of the country's security institutions, further attacks against security forces and government officials seem

all but inevitable. However, while violence remains at unacceptably high levels here, we have no reason to believe at this point that it will escalate either quantitatively or qualitatively.

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BASSETT